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Culture

A school's secret sauce

McREL

Message from the CEO

Tim Waters, CEO, McREL

McREL is known as an organization that conducts, examines, and translates rigorous quantitative research into useful information for educators. Indeed, we have spent decades analyzing research on the science of education and translating it into effective teaching, schooling, and leadership practices. We have learned during these decades that the value of our findings are maximized or mitigated by the organizational culture in which they are utilized. Culture matters. In fact, it matters so much that we are devoting this issue of *Changing Schools* to it. To some, focusing on organizational culture just seems "touchy feely," but in many ways, school culture has surfaced in our research as the often overlooked factor in school improvement efforts.

For example, while conducting a meta-analysis of school-level leadership, we discovered an interesting, but not surprising, phenomenon. The study demonstrated a significant relationship between leadership and student achievement. We also found, however, examples where teachers rated their principals as strong leaders in schools with *lower* than expected student achievement.

Our initial hypothesis about why this might occur was confirmed in a follow-up study in which we found that when leading bold improvement efforts (which we've described as "second-order" change), one of the first things that suffers is a school's culture—specifically, a shared vision, sense of purpose, cohesiveness, overall well-being of staff members, patterns of communication, predictable routines, and a sense of control. Principals who fail to address the implications for a school's culture during times of change are likely to see their efforts fail.

We have concluded from our research that culture reflects four attributes of *Purposeful Communities*: agreement on what people can accomplish only because they work together as part of an organization, agreement on ways in which they will work together as an organization, effective use of all tangible and intangible assets in the organization, and high levels of collective efficacy. The top priority of every organizational leader is to develop these attributes as the building blocks of a strong and healthy organizational culture.

In this issue, we take a critical look at school culture, making a case for considering it when implementing improvement efforts. We offer concrete guidance for improving school culture and provide examples of what happens when school leaders fail to acknowledge its importance in their endeavors. We hope the articles that follow inspire you to include the critical factor of school culture in the equation of your next improvement effort.

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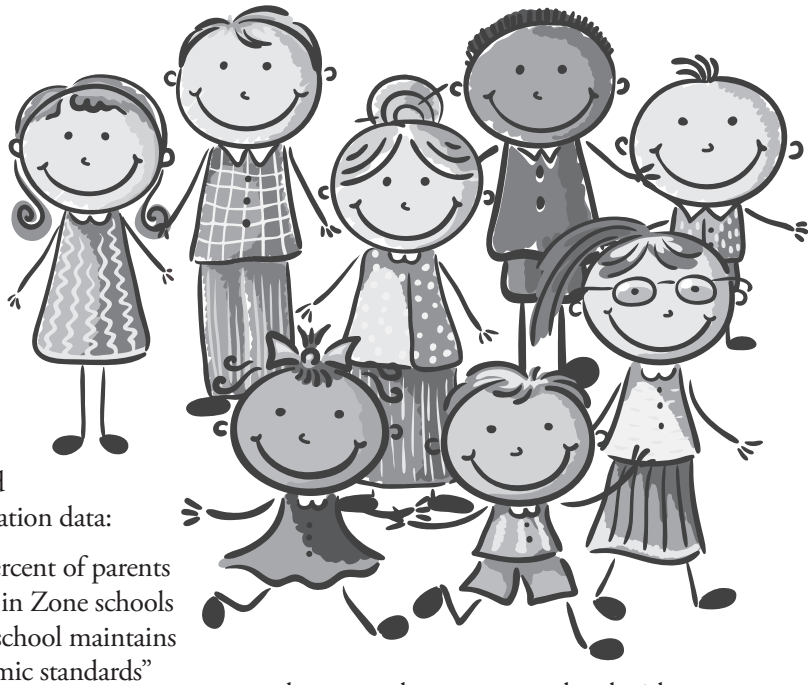
Culture

The "secret sauce" of school improvement



By Bryan Goodwin

Three years ago, Miami-Dade County Public Schools created, amid much fanfare, a "School Improvement Zone" that targeted eight low-performing high schools and their 31 feeder schools. On paper, the Zone appears to have focused on the right things, such as improving reading instruction and providing extra time for learning by extending the school day by one hour and the school calendar by 10 days.

Yet, three years and $100 million later, the district has little to show for its effort. According to the district's internal report (Urdegar, 2009), academic growth rates for 8th graders in the Zone schools were actually lower than students in comparison schools. It's worth noting that many schools in the control group already were focused on improving reading instruction through the federal Reading First program, leaving the most significant (and costly) difference between the Zone schools and the comparison group the additional time added to the school day and calendar.

So why didn't the extra time pay off in higher student growth rates?

For starters, many students played hooky; absenteeism in the Zone schools spiked significantly during the extra days. Moreover, 60 minutes added to a day might not really be enough extra time for struggling students to receive the support they need. Yet another clue to understanding what went wrong surfaced from the evaluation data:

- Only 43 percent of parents of children in Zone schools said their "school maintains high academic standards" versus 62 percent in control schools.
- Only about half, 56 percent, of students in Zone schools said "this school is safe" versus 70 percent in control schools.
- Just 34 percent of teachers in Zone schools reported that "staff morale is high" versus 55 percent in control schools.

The district's own report concluded that low staff morale in the Zone schools likely contributed to the effort's failure. So, if there's a $100 million lesson to learn from the Miami experience, it may be that school culture is a key—and often missing—ingredient in school reform efforts.

The missing ingredient

In 2001, McREL researchers launched a four-year project to determine how high-poverty, high-performing, "beat-the-odds" schools differ from low-performing schools serving similar students. After surveying hundreds of teachers, we got a surprising answer. We found that low-performing schools did many of the "right" things—things that research says are correlated with higher levels of student achievement. They offered challenging curricula, encouraged teacher collaboration, and tried to improve teachers' practices through high-quality professional development. The missing ingredient—the thing that beat-the-odds schools were attending to that struggling schools were not—was their school culture.

The study, *High-Needs Schools: What Does It Take to Beat the Odds?* found that teachers in high-performing schools were more likely than those in low-performing schools to report these elements were in place at their schools:

- A shared mission and goals
- A safe and orderly climate
- A strong press for high academic achievement
- Structured and well-managed classrooms

Taken together, these elements help create a "culture of high expectations" in a school. Schools that beat the odds develop, with input from teachers, a schoolwide vision and a clear focus for their

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improvement efforts; in turn, their vision sets high expectations for student performance and behavior. Simply stated, the culture of high-performing schools (as in KIPP schools and in the Promise Academy in Harlem, the subject of Paul Tough's book, *Whatever it Takes*) boils down to two simple, yet powerful rules: "work hard" and "be nice." That such school reform components as "assessment and monitoring," "collaboration," "professional development," and "individualizing instruction" do not appear on this list doesn't mean they're unimportant. It just means that teachers in both low- and high-performing schools reported at similar rates that their schools were attending to these issues.

Low-performing schools: One big, *unhappy* family

Tolstoy opens his novel *Anna Karenina* with the line, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The same might be said of school cultures. While high-functioning schools reflect many similar characteristics, low-performing schools display an array of dysfunctional behaviors. Charles Payne, in his book, *So Much Reform, So Little Change,* provides numerous examples of toxic, dysfunctional school cultures. Here are a few examples he provides:

- A teacher in the Bronx is given two weeks by her principal to "shape up or ship out" after she submitted too many reports about disruptive students (including three about a boy who tries to suffocate himself with a plastic bag and throw himself from a third-story window).
- A young teacher in Utah, who eats lunch with his students, plays with them at recess, reads with them in the library, and stays with them afterschool when they are in trouble is told by his principal to "tone it down and keep the peace" (Kane, 1992, as cited in Payne, p. 21).
- After receiving national certification, a teacher in Virginia becomes the subject of malicious gossip and finds garbage in his mailbox, presumably put there by jealous colleagues.

These experiences are not only common; they go to the heart of the problem in low-performing schools, according to Payne, who cites ongoing research from the Consortium on Chicago School Research. When the Consortium compared the 30 most highly rated schools in Chicago with 30 of the lowest performing ones, it discovered that questions related to the quality of relationships—in particular, the level of trust and respect teachers have for one another—were among the best predictors of school performance.

Payne cautions his readers, however, that while it is tempting to see adults in dysfunctional schools "acting like fools and assume that's all they are," (p. 24) that these adults are, in fact, victims of their environments, which have been shaped by external factors:

> Take a decently functioning suburban school, take away 40 percent of its funding, most of its better teachers, and the top-performing 50 percent of its students, and see how much fun faculty meetings would be after that. If we give people an enormously challenging task and only a fraction of the resources they need to accomplish it, sooner or later they start to turn on one another, making the job more difficult still. (p. 24)

The power of "can do"

In his book, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, Martin Seligman recounts the unintended outcomes of a laboratory experiment conducted at the University of Pennsylvania in the mid 1960s. The purpose was simple: to see if the dogs would become conditioned to a particular tone when it was followed by a brief, mild electrical shock (akin to a static shock) and exhibit a Pavlovian response, reacting with fear when they heard the tone.

After conditioning the dogs to the pairing of the tone with the shock, the researchers placed the dogs into a large box with two compartments separated by a low wall they could easily jump over. The scientists expected that when they rang the tone, the dogs would jump into the next compartment to avoid the coming shock. Instead, the dogs cowered and whimpered, making no attempt to avoid the coming jolts of electricity.

Seligman realized that the dogs had been "taught" to be helpless. During the conditioning, nothing they did changed the outcome (they got shocked every time), and they "'learned' that nothing they did mattered. So why try?" (p. 20). Observing the dogs' learned helplessness, Seligman realized that people often learn similar behavior.

The cultures of low-performing schools reflect a learned helplessness. Teachers in these schools "learn" that nothing ever gets better and nothing they do matters, so they hunker down and wait for each new program to pass as quickly as possible. In such demoralized school cultures, technical fixes—such as bringing in a new reading program, creating

90-minute reading blocks, or extending the school day—rarely have much impact.

In contrast, teachers in high-performing schools believe that as individuals, and as a group, they are capable of improving student achievement, and they trust their colleagues to work as hard as they do to make it happen. Ohio State University researcher Wayne Hoy and his colleagues (2006) have coined the term "academic optimism" as a way to define the cultures of high-performing schools, which display three characteristics:

1. Press for academic achievement
2. Collective efficacy (i.e., a shared belief among teachers that they can help students succeed)
3. Faculty trust in parents and students

After surveying teachers in nearly 100 schools, Hoy and his colleagues determined that academic optimism was an even more powerful predictor of student achievement than socioeconomic status:

> In the same way individuals can develop learned helplessness, organizations can be seduced by pervasive pessimism. According to the pessimist view, voiced with a tired resignation, "These kids can't learn, and there is nothing I can do about it, so why worry about academic achievement. … Academic optimism, in stark contrast, views teachers as capable, students as willing, parents as supportive, and the task as achievable. (p. 440)

McREL's own meta-analysis of research on effective leaders similarly points to the importance of building a can-do school culture (what we call a "purposeful community"). Most notably, among 21 responsibilities of school leaders linked to higher levels of student achievement, we found that effective principals do the following:

- Set high, concrete goals and expect all students to reach those goals.
- Develop a clear vision for what the school could be like and promote a sense of staff cooperation and cohesion.
- Involve teachers in decision making and sharing leadership.
- Systematically celebrate teachers' accomplishments (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Final thoughts

We think of school culture as the "secret sauce" of school improvement. It's not the *only* ingredient that matters, of course. Schools must still attend to the technical ingredients of reform, such as improving reading instruction or using data to differentiate learning, depending on each school's needs. A can-do culture, after all, must still *do* something. In the end, a strong, positive school culture can give these more standard-fare ingredients the extra zing that makes a real difference for students.

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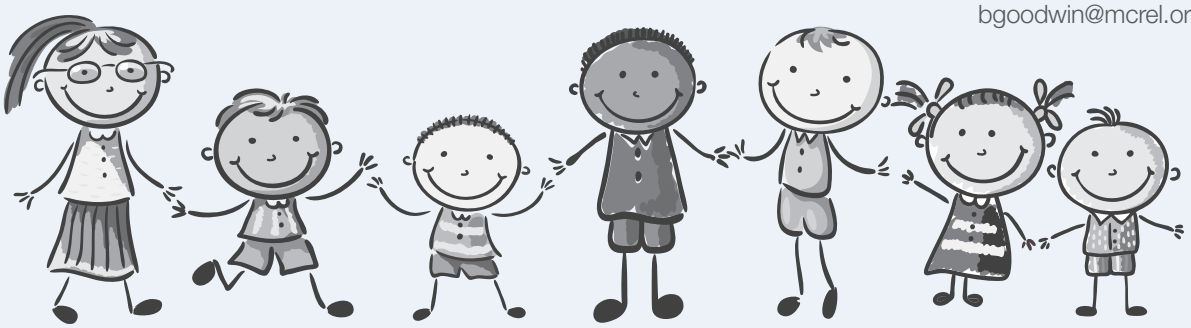
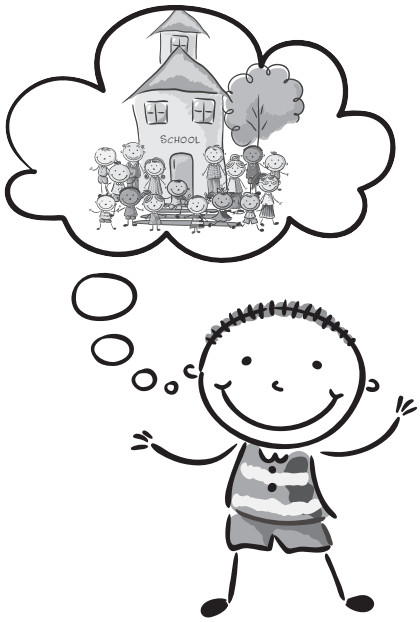


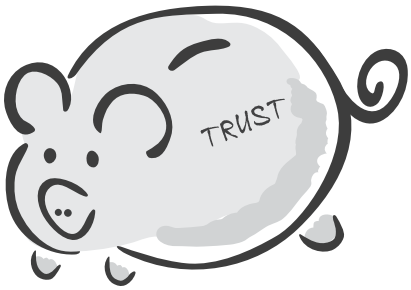
School improvement's

By Danette Parsley



Envision the ideal.

Meet with parents, community members, teachers, administrators, students, and anyone else with a stake in the school to create a shared vision for your school's future that sets a clear and compelling direction for improvement. The vision should energize individuals, unify the school, provide coherence, and reduce confusion about decisions. Remember that the things leaders do and say every day reflect and influence a school's values.



Build your trust accounts.

Trust is the foundation for productive interpersonal relationships—an essential component of every school culture. Building trust sets the stage for open communication, collaboration, and engagement during any type of change. Be aware and reduce the incidence of "mistrustful" actions—high turnover, lack of follow through, or top-down decision making that appears to be arbitrary or not in the best interests of the school (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Aim for high levels of trust to facilitate teamwork, encourage participation, and support a healthy culture of continuous improvement.

Go below the surface.

Dig deep to uncover the root causes of low student performance. Schools spend time, effort, and resources incorporating new instructional strategies, adopting new textbooks, or improving classroom management, but these types of changes, though necessary, often aren't sufficient for lasting change. Get to the root of achievement issues by unearthing underlying assumptions and beliefs, attitudes, values, and expectations that drive decisions and behaviors.

"special ingredients"

Create a can-do culture.

Use feedback and recognition to motivate everyone in the school, create a sense of efficacy, and maintain momentum for change. Structure whole-school mastery experiences that involve the entire staff in identifying a need and a corresponding solution (that is manageable and for which results can be measured in a short time frame), setting expectations, implementing the change, monitoring the results, and experiencing the power of doing it together.

Embrace productive conflict.

Create a culture of inquiry by supporting collaboration and open communication. Use diverse perspectives to deepen relationships and learning. Establish processes for facilitating dialogue in which staff can support and challenge each other and, as a result, increase support to students. Teachers need opportunities to critically examine, reflect on, and discuss their practice.

Put yourself in their shoes.

Change, by definition, requires a shift in the way things are done, which requires *people* to do things differently. Attend to their needs by "walking in their shoes," and help them see how the change might make their lives easier. Provide information, resources, and emotional support.

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Beyond Sheer Will and Determination
Understanding Magnitude of Change

By Mel Sussman

The New York City Marathon stretches 26.2 agonizing miles through the five boroughs of Manhattan, taking its contestants over double-decker bridges, up steep hills, and through multiple neighborhoods, to a finish in majestic Central Park. That is, that's the route for those with the inner strength to survive the numbing temperatures, burning foot blisters, and mind-draining exhaustion it takes to complete the challenge. Amy, my 25-year-old daughter, somehow found a way to triumph in her first attempt, clocking in at 5 hours and 23 seconds, without ever running even a half marathon prior to this bold attempt. Definitely sheer will and determination!

Of course, it really took far more than sheer will and determination. Conditioning, athleticism, proper diet, and extensive planning all played a significant role. So, how about the principal who tackles the issue of unacceptably low student achievement? How far can sheer will and determination go when faced with the additional challenges of a high teacher turnover rate and high mobility among students?

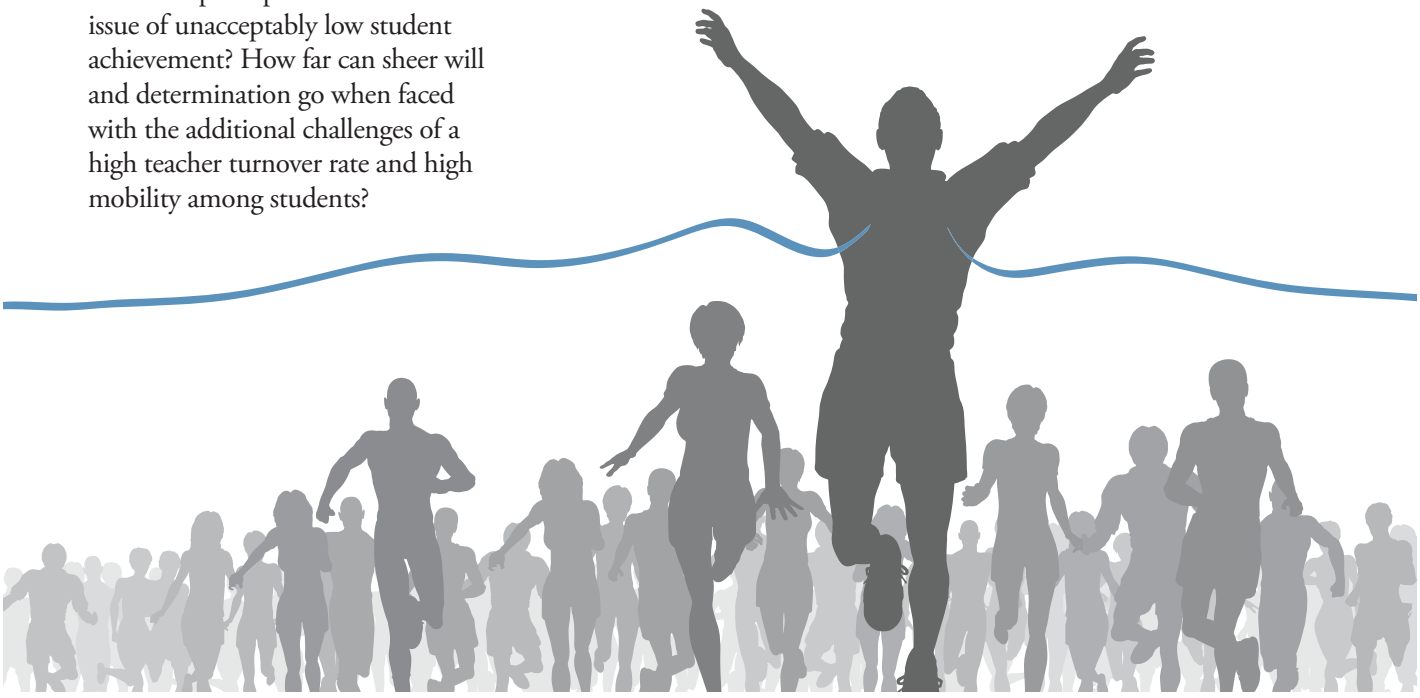
I had my own theory about the effectiveness of driving home an initiative of major proportions in the school community. Like many other school leaders, I operated under the assumption that if a plan had merit, there was no reason why it shouldn't be implemented, and successfully implemented, at that. What I eventually learned, however, was that beyond having a strong desire to succeed, a principal needs a clear understanding of the 21 leadership responsibilities identified in McREL's research on school leadership. I know from my own experience of trying to change a school culture how important it is to know these responsibilities, and as important, to understand the impact that change has on others.

Realizing that it's a culture thing

I began my principal stint at North Valley Middle School in a semi-rural Colorado district by implementing an assessment program that I assumed would guide us toward the goal of improving student achievement. No one asked me about any strategies, and I didn't reveal what I had (or didn't have) in mind.

Instead, I invited the faculty to a retreat prior to the start of the school year, where I unveiled my achievement/assessment plan. Almost all faculty members attended, and after a relaxing breakfast and introductions, I presented the plan. As I spelled out the details, I sensed, but never acknowledged, a change in the room's climate. That drop in temperature, which I thought was due to a frigid air conditioning system, was instead the cold wave of apprehension felt by those listening.

My announcement that the new program would involve monthly tests, data collection, newly designed lesson plans, and regularly scheduled



discussion meetings did more than grab everyone's attention. Hands shot up, and question after question came barreling at me as to how we were to accomplish all that I had just thrown at them. My reply was not to worry. Everything would be fine. If they would give it time, they would see the results, I assured them.

The meeting concluded, everyone quickly and quietly left the room, and I was left to ponder what had just taken place. Where did I go off course? I was convinced that my plan was solid. In order to make changes, we needed an initiative that would boldly alter the low scores at North Valley, I rationalized, unaware that I had completely misunderstood the importance of "magnitude of change." What seemed logical, consistent, and straightforward to me was perceived very differently by them.

Understanding the complexities of change

When changes require learning new approaches, practices, and procedures, and when a change conflicts with prevailing norms, individuals are faced with the personal implications of "second-order" change. The responses that stakeholders have to changes with second-order implications are often labeled as resistance.

In fact, my faculty wasn't reacting to the change itself. At some level, they understood that change was needed. It was what the change implied for them personally. I was turning their world upside down, and those who felt highly competent in their prior situation now faced an uncertainty and sense of incompetence about where they were headed. They felt an immediate sense of loss, and an inclination to blame whoever was responsible for that occurrence.

Plus, I had ignored some of the 21 responsibilities, which were so necessary if our improvement plan was to succeed. I had failed to address "culture," "order," "communication," and "input"—all essential when implementing an educational initiative. These responsibilities are explained in McREL's *Balanced Leadership Framework*® and in the related professional development:

- **Culture:** Promoting a sense of well-being among teachers and staff, combined with developing a shared vision of what the school could be like.
- **Order:** Providing clear structures, rules, and procedures for teachers and staff.
- **Communication:** Establishing strong lines of two-way communication.
- **Input:** Involving the teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies.

Confronting my own norms and beliefs

At the time, I had not heard of McREL's *Framework* or the responsibilities. To my way of thinking, if you had a good idea, you simply pushed forward. During the first year, many faculty members actually did support the initiative, but members of the "disenchanted group" did their best to bring down the overall effectiveness of our endeavor. Instead of addressing this negativity, I ignored it, and the issues compounded.

Eventually, I could no longer ignore the invisible line in the sand that had been drawn; there were enough staff members on either side to start one great tug of war. I realized then that changing the school's culture from one of low student achievement to one of high expectations had to begin with a change in my approach to leadership.

Building a positive culture

I began by ensuring communication was a two-way process. A portion of faculty and leadership meetings became a forum for questions and concerns. I also became more flexible in implementing the plan. I listened to and took suggestions, including bringing in McREL consultants to deliver professional development on research-based instructional strategies. I publicly praised early wins and teachers' efforts, and above all, I made a huge effort to be visible in classrooms—monitoring, evaluating, and supporting new approaches to instruction.

It was trial-and-error throughout our three-year turnaround, and I now know that paying attention to culture, order, communication, and input are behaviors that I shouldn't have just stumbled upon. It is crystal clear to me that any second-order change needs a well thought out planning stage, which involves the school's leadership team and entire faculty.

In the end, I was fortunate. The plan did take hold, and the school exhibited great gains in student achievement, with 8th graders who had entered at the outset of the work showing the most growth gains. Today, a purposeful community thrives in the school, and I realize how naïve I was to think that my plan could have been successful just through sheer will and determination. In order for any plan to have the best possible chance for success, the principal must first strive to foster a unified sense of purpose, coupled with outcomes that matter to all.

Mel Sussman was so inspired by his experience working with McREL that he came to work for us. He is a principal consultant here and can be reached at 303.632.5589 or msussman@mcrel.org.

You can't judge a school by a classroom, or can you?

By Howard Pitler & Elizabeth Hubbell

Stepping into a classroom is unpredictable, even when a visit is scheduled in advance and the objective has been shared ahead of time. Classroom observations, by their nature, surprise, confound, fascinate, or sometimes just go awry. Yet, they also can provide a clear picture of the teaching and learning that is occurring in the classroom—and whether a culture of high expectations exists in a school.

Observations provide school leaders with invaluable data on everything from how students are grouped for instruction to how well professional development initiatives are translated in the classroom to teachers' beliefs about the abilities of their students and themselves.

At McREL, our Power Walkthrough® software, which allows administrators and teachers to observe specific, research-based indicators related to student achievement, has provided a vehicle for gathering these types of data to create a picture of what classrooms across the nation really look like. To date, we have gathered data from more than 27,000 classroom observations across 27 states, which we've aggregated into a common database. These data have been gathered by administrators and teacher leaders who have participated in a two-day workshop, which showed them what to look for and how to accurately record strategies they see teachers using. The specific indicators that we teach observers to look for are:

- Primary instructional strategy the teacher is using
- Level of Bloom's Taxonomy the lesson focuses on
- How students are grouped for instruction
- Technology the teacher is using
- Technology the students are using
- Primary evidence of learning during the visit

Data portray a disappointing picture

First, let's look at what the data tell us about the teaching strategies used in the classroom. In the workshop, observers learned about the nine categories of research-based instructional strategies identified in McREL's *Classroom Instruction that Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Because teachers simultaneously use multiple strategies in a lesson, observers learned how to determine the primary, or most-used, strategy. Our data reveal that the most-used strategy is "Practice," followed closely by "Cues and Questions" (see Fig. 1). In general, teachers rarely used "Generating and Testing Hypotheses," a strategy research suggests will move students to high levels of learning. The data also show little evidence of "Summarizing" and "Note taking" or "Identifying Similarities and Differences," the category with the highest effect size relative to student achievement. It also is telling that classroom observers often noted "No Research-based Strategy" was used.

Another set of data focuses on the level of Bloom's Taxonomy used in classrooms. From lowest to highest, the levels of the taxonomy are "Remember," "Understand," "Apply," "Analyze," "Evaluate," and "Create." Our data (see Fig. 2) indicate that 25 percent of all classroom lessons are at the lowest

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Figure 1. Instructional Strategies

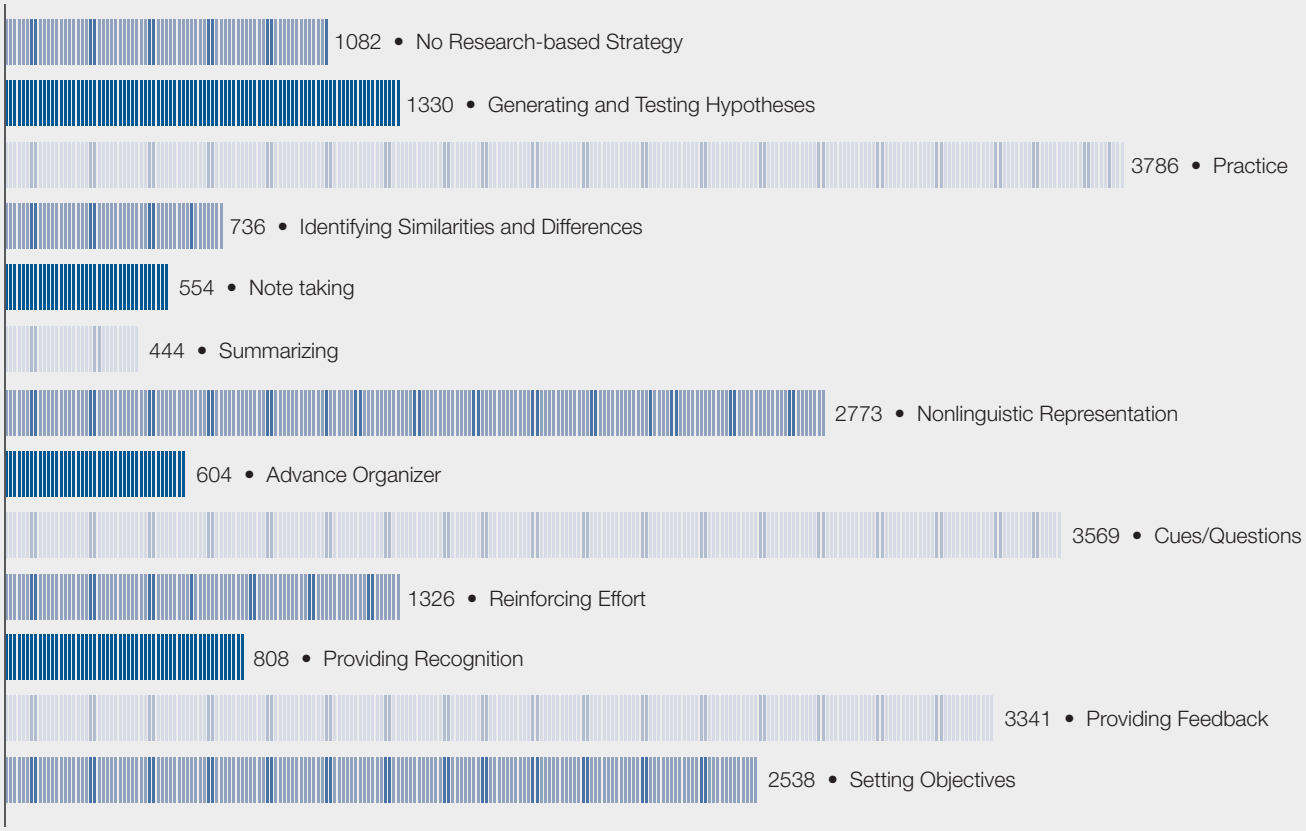


Figure 2. Bloom's Taxonomy Data

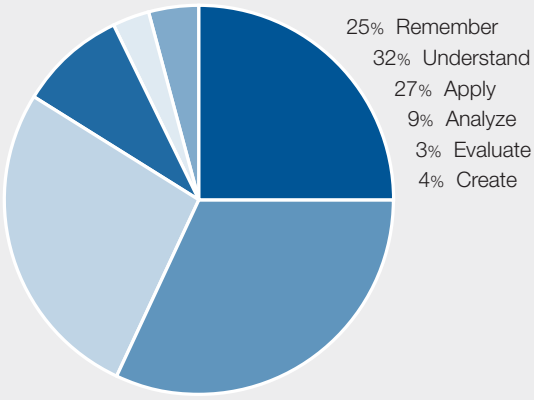
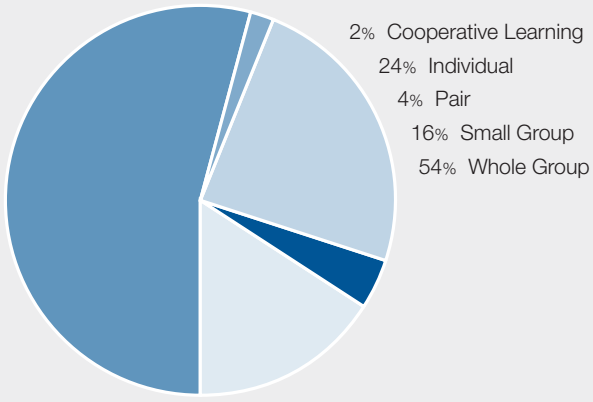


Figure 3. Student Grouping



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level (Remember), with another 32 percent at the Understand level. Students spend over half of their days in the classroom learning at the lowest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy or, put differently, students are engaged in lessons that allow them to Evaluate and Create just seven percent of the time.

In noting how students were grouped for instruction (see Fig. 3), observers recorded that whole group settings occurred in 54 percent of all observations, and students were grouped individually in almost 25 percent of observations. Cooperative learning, one of the instructional strategies identified as highly effective in *Classroom Instruction that Works*, made up a scant two percent of all observations.

Two other data sets we reviewed were 1) teacher use of technology and 2) student use of technology. We looked at the broad range of technologies outlined in the book *Using Technology with Classroom Instruction that Works* (Pitler, Hubbell, Kuhn, & Malenoski, 2007), including word processing, brainstorming software, multimedia, Web resources, and data probes. It was startling to find that no technology was used by teachers in 80 percent of all observations, especially because these data include schools with 1:1 laptop programs. The data on students' use of technology are even less optimistic, with fewer students (81%) using technology than teachers.

From these data, we know that students in many classrooms across America primarily work in whole group or individual activities, are engaged at the lowest two levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, and are doing practice activities or listening as the teacher asks questions. We also know they rarely use any technology while at school, even though technology is a major part of their lives outside of the classroom. Obviously, there is much room for improvement.

Steps toward a positive school culture

Data gathered during observations allow schools and districts to improve the ability to focus on one area at a time and set clear and attainable goals to make positive changes.

The indicators we've discussed here are interrelated parts of a larger dynamic system, and all contribute to a culture of high expectations. To improve the classroom environment and make school the dynamic, interactive, and enlightening experience it should be for children, school and district leaders should use observations to help, among many other things, determine the culture of their school before, during, and after implementing school improvement initiatives.

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Sept. 2	Deepening Student Understanding with Good Questions in Afterschool	This Webinar provides the research behind higher level questioning and ready-to-use tools anyone can use to improve questioning techniques. **www.mcrel.org/peak**
Sept. 16	English-Language Learning in Afterschool Programs: Vocabulary Development	In this Webinar, you will learn fun and interactive ways to teach new vocabulary to ELL students in an afterschool setting. **www.mcrel.org/peak**
Sept. 30	Afterschool Games & Activities that Build Academic Vocabulary	This Webinar focuses on building students' background knowledge so they can succeed inside and outside of the classroom. You'll learn research-based approaches—including games and other activities—to build students' academic vocabulary in afterschool settings. **www.mcrel.org/peak**
Oct. 1–2	McREL Power Walkthrough® Seminar & Software	The Power Walkthrough seminar and software helps school leaders turn their classroom observations into "power walkthroughs" by using a PDA, Tablet PC, Blackberry, or iPhone device loaded with McREL's Web-based software. **Training held at McREL in Denver, CO** **www.mcrel.org/service/174**
Oct. 8	McREL Power Walkthrough® Webinar & Software	In this Webinar, you'll learn how to increase the effectiveness of your regular classroom observations by using your handheld device (PDA, Smartphone, etc.) and McREL's powerful software based on the nine categories of instructional strategies identified in *Classroom Instruction that Works*. **www.mcrel.org/service/197**

McREL Products & Services

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Learn more at www.mcrel.org/SuccessInSight

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View the McREL Blog online: http://mcrel.typepad.com

Power Walkthrough®

Get more from your classroom observations

You know that to be an effective instructional leader, you should conduct regular classroom observations. But what should you look for when observing teachers? How should you track progress and use your observations to coach teachers? How can you determine if your school's staff development efforts are improving teaching and student learning?

McREL's Power Walkthrough software lets you use hand-held devices (such as a PDA, Tablet PC, Blackberry, or iPhone) loaded with McREL software that uses our popular manual, *Classroom Instruction that Works*, as the basis for classroom observations. The software helps you to focus your observations on effective instructional strategies, student engagement, teachers' use of technology, and other factors that research shows to influence student learning.

McREL offers regular Power Walkthrough seminars through Webinars or live training in our Denver, Colo., facility. We can also bring these seminars directly to your school, district, or education agency.

Learn more and sign up for a free demo at www.mcrel.org/PowerWalkthrough

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Using Writing in Mathematics to Deepen Student Learning

McREL's new booklet provides specific guidance for teachers to use writing as a tool for learning mathematics content. Author Vicki Urquhart first tackles the question, "Why write in mathematics?" Section two describes what writing looks like in most math classrooms, and the closing section describes strategies and provides examples of practices teachers can implement right away.

Preview the booklet online at www.mcrel.org/product/375

Scenarios offer Lifelines to an uncertain future

By Laura Lefkowits

Let's say you're a finalist for the superintendent job of your dreams. You're sailing through the community meeting portion of the hiring process when an expectant (and expecting) young mom approaches the microphone. "My daughter Kayla started kindergarten this fall," she says. "She will graduate from high school in 2020. What will you do as superintendent to make sure that she will be prepared to survive and thrive when she does?"

How do you respond? If you could ask for a "lifeline," you might call a clairvoyant to find out what the world will be like in 2020. And if you could do that, what questions would you ask? What would you most like to know about the future in order to prepare for it today?

At McREL, we've been asking such questions since 2003, when we began to explore the future and build our knowledge of the scenario-planning process. Today, as we prepare for 2020, we have identified two critical uncertainties about the future whose outcome could dramatically shape the future for Kayla and her unborn sibling.

The first is the question, what will be the expected outcomes of a good education in 2020? Currently, American education has planted its policies squarely in the ground of requiring standardized outcomes for all students, such as meeting state-determined content standards and being accepted into a post-secondary educational institution. Such outcomes ensure high expectations for every student and, due to 21st century global challenges, the argument goes, who can afford *not* to be "college-ready"?

At the same time, persistent low achievement and high dropout rates, especially for the most disadvantaged students, call into question these standardized outcomes. Some suggest we might better meet the demands of a complex global economy by allowing students to demonstrate variable competencies according to their own interests and aptitudes—be they academic, technical, or in some other category we have yet to imagine.

A second uncertainty relates to the future of the current system of schooling. There are those who believe that the best opportunity for Kayla will come from reforming today's system by building upon and improving the federal, state, and local structures that fund schools, in order to guarantee equity and quality of educational outcomes, and to provide accountability mechanisms appropriate for a public good. Others believe the system must be re-invented for true progress to occur and have their sights set on the "creative destruction" of the system or on building a new one.

As we explore these uncertainties, and others, we are creating a set of plausible scenarios about the future in 2020. From these, we will develop strategic options for McREL that will help us contribute to the future success of Kayla and her peers. We don't have a clairvoyant, but our structured exploration of the future and the scenarios we will develop will provide the lifeline we need to be prepared to activate strategies for success in the future.

Laura Lefkowits is McREL's vice president of policy & planning services. She is a liaison between McREL and local, state, and national policymakers. You can contact her at 303.632.5535 or llefkowits@mcrel.org.

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We want to hear from you.

This issue of *Changing Schools* is about culture being the "secret sauce" of school improvement. If you are on Twitter, describe your school culture in a tweet containing the #CS60 hashtag or send a short e-mail to us at changingschools@mcrel.org.

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